

25 April 2014 Convocation Speech

Students and family members, faculty and staff - I am greatly honored to be here today and appreciate the opportunity to address you.

Last week I was in Florida doing a lecture and demonstration, which made me reflect on different places I have been (and not been) during my career at BYU. I was in Los Angeles last month and Russia last year. Though I have been in many places, I have never been in Cahoots. Apparently, you can't go alone. You have to be in Cahoots with someone else. I've also never been in Cognito. I hear no one recognizes you there. I have, however, been in Sane. They don't have an airport; you have to be driven there. I have made several trips there, thanks to my students, and some department colleagues. I would like to go to Conclusions, but you have to jump, and, these days, I'm not as big on physical activity as I used to be. One of my favorite places to be is in Suspense! It seems to get the adrenalin flowing and at my age, I can use the stimulus!

On a recent trip I saw a bumper sticker that read,
Just because no one understands you, it doesn't mean you're an artist.

I'm excited today to be speaking to artists and would like to discuss the value of creativity and imagination, the subject of life-long learning in both secular and spiritual contexts, and the uniqueness of each individual in the educational process. My references today will relate predominantly to the disciplines of visual arts, but I believe the principles addressed readily transfer to other disciplines as well.

In one of his letters, the artist Vincent Van Gogh said, *I have bought myself a very beautiful book on anatomy. It was in fact very expensive, but it will be of use to me all my life.*¹

Education is expensive but, if often and correctly accessed, will **last us all our lives**. The intimation also is that the best scholars are *lifelong learners*.

President David O McKay stated,

The aim of education is to develop resources ...that will contribute to (ones) well-being as long as life endures; to develop power...to become one who can face life with courage, meet disaster with fortitude, and face death without fear.

At BYU we are told that scholarship and creative work should bring both faculty and students to the "frontiers of their disciplines." The opportunity to join in the quest for new knowledge and understanding, to contribute to the process of artistic **performance, expression, or creation**; and to improve the quality of life are responsibilities and opportunities of (students and faculty at BYU) - what the AIMS of a BYU Education might define as being *intellectually enlarged*.

But what does it also mean to explore learning or creativity in the light of the restored gospel? To be *spiritually strengthened*?

¹ Letter from Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh (October 1884), <http://webexhibits.org>, 23 September 2004.

In the publication **Educating Zion**, (given to all new faculty as they begin their careers at BYU)...we read:

From its inception more than a century ago, the goal of Brigham Young University has been to offer "a new kind of education" for Zion, one based on precepts "revealed by the Lord," as Karl G. Maeser once remarked.

...This effort to educate Zion has been guided and shaped by wise leaders who have spoken about learning not only with the mind, but also with the spirit. Welch, John W., and Norton, Don E., eds. Educating Zion. Provo: BYU Studies, Brigham Young University, 1996.

Recent visitor – author, film producer, human rights leader, and world peace activist, Don Mullan was a seminar speaker in the Department of Visual Arts. Don is also Roman Catholic. To a dear friend he wrote:

...I wish you could be here with me over these sacred days at Brigham Young University. Today an impromptu student's choir riveted me over the concourse where they were singing. Their harmony was so beautiful they brought tears to my eyes and I had a profound sense that the spirit of God was undoubtedly present on this university campus. As you know, I have, over my lifetime, been to many campuses, but I have never had this profound sense of the sacred before. The Mormon people I have had the privilege of meeting on this visit are deeply and profoundly Christian... It has been a deep spiritual privilege to have been blessed with the grace of walking among them.

I grew up in the small mining towns of Tooele and Moab. My parents were not professional artists but both drew and painted. My father copied Dutch master paintings while my mother painted local scenery on location – “en plein air” as they say. One early memory is of stacked canvases and the smell of oil paint coming from inside our front closet – a magical moment for me.

My parents not only fostered in their children the importance of art and creativity but more importantly a love of learning. Our travels and family vacations took us to different types of museums as well as art collections. My parents loved music and literature and in addition to a home library subscribed to a number of magazines as well - large in format in those days and filled with grand scale art and illustration. In the tradition of my father, I copied my first painting in oils from one of those magazines in the fifth grade.

Two-time Pulitzer Prize winner David McCullough remarked -The great thing about the arts is that the only way you learn how to do it is by doing it. If a child learns nothing but that as a guide to life, that's invaluable. You can't learn to play the piano without playing the piano; you can't learn to write without writing, and, in many ways, you can't learn to think without thinking.

David McCullough Interview THE TITLE ALWAYS COMES LAST

Artist Juliette Aristides stated,

While people share much with other living creatures, the desire for beauty, the capacity for self-reflection, and the longing for eternity are distinctively human qualities...The enormity of human suffering in the world does not render (these

aspirations)... trivial. Rather, it affirms **an appreciation of aesthetics as fundamental to our nature.**

British philosopher, and BYU Wheatly Institute lecturer, Rodger Scruton stated,

Through beauty we are brought into the presence of the sacred. (and) We also come to understand our own nature as spiritual beings.

Author, educator, and activist Parker Palmer believes that the goal of education is to develop the objective rational intellect **and** to nurture the subjective domain of the mind. It is from the subjective intellect that **a sense of wonder emerges** that is integrated with the objective domain and rational inquiry. An adherence to subjective inner exploration of learners as part of their intellectual development constitutes learning as a **spiritual journey**, which Palmer believes is in essence the **very soul of education.**

Elder Neal A. Maxwell stated,

The convergent implementation of so many correct principles in the educational enterprise at BYU if not perfectly done; it is, nevertheless, impressively done.²

*...this university and LDS scholars here, and others like them elsewhere, have special things to do in a special age in a special time". You have the professional and **spiritual tools** as has no preceding generation of LDS scholars."³*

He also stated,

When by wise self-management we are creative, then we mortals taste what Pascal called "the dignity of causality," the capacity to cause that which had not existed in quite that way before! Something pertaining to truth and beauty occurs that would not have happened quite that way without us! Thus as "agents unto" ourselves we use the power that is in us to do good, but also to do it well, whether our creativity involves the use of our voice, our hands, our muscles, or our conceptual powers.

In a videotaped interview entitled **The Artist and the Spirit**, President Boyd K. Packer remarked,

*So the marvelous thing is that members of the Church **in the arts** can do what they want...but they ought to do it well, and they have the right to do it with inspiration.*

Earlier in the interview, speaking specifically about how LDS artists can prepare to *do it well*, he said that talent and inspiration are not enough; great artists, writers, and musicians need to be trained—which means, at least in part, that they need to learn what the world has to teach...so that their work in his words *will be creditable.*

Speaking about the **The Importance of Creativity** in his new book entitled **21 Principles**, Elder Richard G. Scott writes:

² Op. Cit., Maxwell, "Why a University", pg. 6.

³ Op. Cit., Maxwell, "Some Thoughts", pg. 70.

*Although the principle of doing new things to achieve new results applies in many areas of life, the underlying quality is the same. **It is creativity. Creativity is what allows us to see things in a new way...***

Elder Scott describes his visit to and fascination with an artist who happened to be the husband of his wife's friend. With some trepidation, Elder Scott bought a book, read it, bought some paints and did a watercolor - he states, *The results, even viewed charitably, were not very good....*

*Later I was privileged to take lessons from a master... teacher... That experience changed everything. I began to appreciate that much can be accomplished with **an understanding of basic principles**. I discovered the importance of **quality materials**. **Objective criticism** from a knowledgeable friend became an appreciated source of growth. There followed other small but important seeds of reinforcement: a prize at the state fair... and the first sale of a watercolor.*

*...efforts to try.... to express feelings with a brush and paint continue to provide a constantly renewing source of pleasure and benefit. There is an awareness of the miracle of color, subtle transitions in value, dramatic contrasts, and appealing shapes and patterns.... **Moreover the masterful work of gifted artists has become a refreshing source of inspiration and learning...***

Wherever I go I see...in ways that would not have been perceived with the same intensity and variety had I not followed that prompting to try something I had never tried before...

*Search for feelings that prompt you to try something new... Otherwise you may never.... enter the doors it opens to insight, enjoyment, **and wonder**. **Every individual has creative capacity**. The satisfaction and growth creativity generates is intended for each of us...(but trying) takes courage.*

*Believe in yourself. **Doubt destroys creativity**, while faith strengthens it ...As you experiment with new things you **will discover a great deal about yourself that likely won't be revealed any other way**.*

In his book, **How Successful Artist's Study**, Sam Adoquei writes,

*All students have what it takes to turn their artistic abilities into the realization of their dreams but what is needed for things to happen **is hidden** until they search for it. All students have the potential to become as good **as they envision themselves capable of becoming**.*

Abigail Adams put it perfectly more than 200 years ago: *Learning is not attained by chance. It must be **sought** with ardor and attended with diligence.*

In a recent BYU Devotional, Elder Robert D. Hales stated,

Too often we dwell in the comfort of our educational strengths and avoid overcoming our educational weaknesses. Thus our greatest strengths can become our greatest weaknesses...We need the courage to take a long step of faith into a fearful darkness,

not knowing how deep the educational cave is that we are about to enter... the reality is that sometimes our best of today is not good enough to succeed in tomorrow's world.

In ***The Undressed Art: Why We Draw***, writer-naturalist Peter Steinhart investigates the rituals, struggles, and joys of **drawing**. Reflecting on what is known about the brain's role in the drawing process, Steinhart explores the visual learning curve: how children begin to draw, how most of them stop, and what brings adults back to this...art form later in life. He identifies one reason to draw:

We draw to find our own originality. It seems like that would be easy to do. Making images is one way we clarify thought and feeling, and we all have some experience doing this: after all, we all dream, and when we dream we feel deeply and originally. But dreaming isn't drawing. Drawing is much harder. Drawing, in the end, redefines you.

To study the work of master artists is to learn that artistic accomplishment combines both highly developed visual sensibilities and articulate practical skills. In most forms of human endeavor, there appears to be no substitute for shaping natural abilities through discipline. In fact, the development of understanding appears to be more liberating than restrictive. When properly understood, the discipline of drawing (for example) can give an artist the ability to communicate visual ideas with conviction while simultaneously developing an inherent sense of confidence in both one's craft and one's vision. **Ability supports both concept and imagination and offers a pathway to life-long learning.**

If drawing is truly an act of discrimination, then the process of refining one's skill can teach the artist discernment as **a way of thinking and as a way of life.**

The artist Henri Matisse declared that...

...to draw is to make an idea precise. Drawing is the precision of thought." He also stated, *"If drawing belongs to the world of spirit and color to that of the senses, you must first to cultivate the spirit.*

Near the end of the movie, ***Saving Mr. Banks***, Walt Disney, after being rejected by Pamela Travers for seemingly the final time, takes a last-gasp flight across the ocean to her home to make one final appeal to turn Mary Poppins into a film star. He flips the script on himself, sharing a story from his childhood about how tough his father was on him...as he carried out the family business as a young child.

Rare is the day when I don't think about that 8 year old boy delivering newspapers in the snow...and old Elias Disney with that strap in his fist. And I am just so tired, Mrs. Travers...tired of remembering it that way. Aren't you tired, too, Mrs. Travers? We all have our sad tales...but don't you want to finish the story? Let it all go and have a life that isn't dictated by the past? Forgiveness...it's what I learned from your books...

Maybe not in life, but in imagination. Because that's what we storytellers do. We restore order with imagination. We instill hope again and again and again.

Reason, said C. S. Lewis, *is the natural order of truth; but **imagination** is the organ of meaning.*

In 1923, the artist Pablo Picasso remarked, *We all know that art is not truth. Art is a lie that makes us realize truth. At least the truth that is given us to understand.*

Picasso's statement may be true of any art form (literature, poetry, etc.) so Picasso's assertion could be rewritten as: "Fiction is the lie that tells the truth." In a novel (art) the writer (artist) tells a fictional story (a lie) that changes our perception of ourselves and the world we live in, that makes us think about reality (truth) in a new way."

As Mark Twain put it – *Truth is stranger than fiction – because Fiction has to make sense.*

I like nonsense, it wakes up the brain cells, said author/artist Theodore Geisel (better known as Dr. Seuss). Fantasy is a necessary ingredient in living, it's a way of looking at life through the wrong end of a telescope. Which is what I do, and that enables you to laugh at life's realities.

Who in this audience has not been influenced by children's books? Creative entities *holding keys to worlds locked inside the imagination, and whose contents depict worlds that exist but cannot be seen.*

Imagination is everything, said Albert Einstein; *It is the preview of life's coming attractions.*

In their book ***Saving Childhood***, film critic Michael Medved and his clinical psychologist wife, Diane assert that the components of innocence - security, **a sense of wonder**, and optimism- are foundational elements in the development of children.

In conclusion, the artist Richard Schmid stated,

Even though you share countless similarities with others, you are unique. No one has your mind or your feelings. They do not notice what you notice, and do not have precisely the same sensitivities and fears. No one has the same idea of God as you. No one embraces life or ponders death and beyond as you do. No one is human in the exact way as you are. Once you understand this, your task is to get in touch with yourself. Find out what moves you, what you believe in, what you truly understand about life, who you are, and what this great experience of being alive means to you...

In General Conference last year, President Uchtdorf stated,

We can... make the mistake of thinking that because someone is different from us, it must mean they are not pleasing to God. This line of thinking leads us to believe that the Church wants to create every member from a single mold—that each one should look, feel, think, and behave like every other. This would contradict the genius of God....It also contradicts the intent and purposes of the Church of Jesus Christ...

Dieter S Uchtdorf, Four Titles, April 2013 General Conference, Priesthood Session

Speaking to a group of youth, President Spencer W Kimball remarked,

*... All of you need to drink in deeply the gospel truths about the eternal nature of your individual identity and the uniqueness of your personality. You need...to feel the perfect love which our Father in Heaven has for you and to sense the value he places upon you **as an individual**.*

Somewhere within all of us there is a wordless center, a part of us that hopes to be immortal in some way, a part that has remained unchanged since we were children, the source of our strength and compassion. This faint confluence of the tangible and the spiritual is where Art comes from. It has no limits, and once you tap into it you will realize what truly rich choices you have. May each painting or drawing you do from that sacred place include an expression of gratitude for the extraordinary privilege of being an artist.

Congratulations graduates - Thank you again so very much for the opportunity to be here and spend a few minutes sharing some thoughts with you.